

## *Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition*



Roberto Franco was born in Mexico City in 1970 and began performing only five years later. While growing up in the Mexican capital, Roberto learned Mexica (pronounced "Me-shee-ka") dance, culture and Nahuatl language within a family dedicated to keeping Mexica traditions strong. He continued to learn from various mentors and now strives to do his part to keep Aztec traditions alive now and into the future.

Emerging as a skilled leader and performer, Roberto began to teach others at age 14 and to perform around the world. He was recruited to teach and choreograph in Wisconsin, moving to Madison in 1999. He resettled in

Milwaukee in 2005 where he co-founded and directs the 12-member Omeyocan Dance Company with his brother Alejandro (Alex) Franco, who is renowned internationally as an Aztec dance soloist and teacher. They perform at public events and Mexica ceremonies around the country. For the past three years, Roberto has been teaching Mexica dance and culture to Milwaukee Public Schools elementary students in an after school program; he also performs with these young dancers.

Mexica dance is energetic and athletic, demanding top physical conditioning, coordination and grace. The pounding drum rhythms push the dancers with a steady force. Other instruments include flute, conch shell and turtle shell. The costumery is spectacular with elaborate feather headdresses, beaded clothing, ankle rattles, and feather shields. The dances are dramatic, often employing ceremonial fire, and symbolically the steps embody ancient Mexica values such as respect for the earth, the four directions and elements; honoring calendric rhythms; and celebrating both life and death.

Roberto's most recent apprentice, Brenda Garcia, focused on regalia. Using both hand and machine stitching, they completed a ceremonial shield, headdress, wrist and arm bands, knee bands, torso regalia, chest regalia, and a base dress. Roberto also taught the cultural connection of these individual pieces to Mexica worldview. Special challenges included sewing multiple layers of fabric and other materials in complex curving patterns, hand sewing individual feathers onto the shield, constructing the base of the headdress, and sewing the feather mounts required for the longer removable pheasant feathers.

Brenda's motivations were personal and communal, "I want to learn more about my culture and I don't think there is anybody else around more qualified to teach me than Roberto. I hope to expand the knowledge to other members of my community. This art form is one part in the big story of our history...(one) that we are never going to find in books."

*"The process of creating a Mexica costume from scratch is a rite of passage that can connect modern-day Mexicas to their ancient past." – Roberto Franco*